MEDIAREADER

AUTUMN 1999

WHAT is POP CULTURE

what is COMMERCIALISM

"We have come to the turning point where this is the final recognition:
The only way to make our space less crowded is to initially overcrowd it to the point of suffocation."

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02. PHILIP MORRIS EXPOSED
03. THE NEW MEDIA
04. HEY KIDS, YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE?

FREE

MEDIAREADER

QUARTERLY • AUTUMN 1999

"No music? I can't believe you are going to start a zine in that format and not even review records!"

Welcome to the first issue of MediaReader! There is no music talk in here unless it relates to the article or it's in an ad. Surprised? Reviewing records isn't too much fun, and there are already more music zines than you could ever possibly finish reading.

I've been wanting to put together a magazine like this for years, but was disillusioned by the endless stacks of vapid zines that constantly invade my house, the concept of raising enough money to cover printing costs, and the idea of brow-beating people into meeting even loose deadlines. Living in an area in which all the zines that were once worthy of reading have either relocated or stopped production altogether, I finally decided that it was time to raise the ante a bit.

The intent of this magazine is to examine the interplay between media and audience: how billboards affect our mood and behavior, how specific markets have commodified counter-culture, how big business influences our elections, et cetera. The importance of this is that these and other issues do not exist in a vacuum; they are the elements that create our culture, and if we want to change the present course of suburban sprawl, strip malls, and mail order garment shopping, we have to begin by being able to articulate the problems with these things.

This zine will be published four times a year. In every issue, I'm going to try to re-print an article from another independent publication that I find extremely valuable. This time it's the dialogue between Sut Jhally and James Twitchell, taken from *Stay Free!*. I hope to have a follow-up to this interview in a future issue, as Sut volunteered to go at it again with Twitchell when I contacted him.

It's important to me that this publication stays free of charge. I'd like to switch formats for the next issue and move to an 8x10 magazine size- it's more expensive, but it's easier to read. The final call will be determined by the amount of ad money that comes in.

This magazine could not have been printed without the benefit rock show. Special thanks to Barisal Guns, Fin Fang Foom, Milemarker, and the Graflex Division for playing- as well as everyone who came out with an enormous amount of support.

Enjoy-
Dave

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HELP DISTRIBUTE THIS MAGAZINE!

This magazine is available free of charge. We do ask that you cover postage:

NOTE: If enough money comes in for future issues, we hope to be able to cover postage for distributors. Get in touch for more information.

USA: $5 = 30+ magazines
$10 = 65+ magazines

OVERSEAS: Postage is double

YOU ARE POP CULTURE

We are constantly inundated by the stimuli that surround us on the street, in stores, in clubs, through magazines, television, performance, and radio. These are the elements that create pop culture, and while it is not currently cool to consider yourself part of the pop culture, this is only because pop culture is currently not cool.

We are creating pop culture every time we make a flier, a record cover, a window display, host a college radio show, have a party, or release a magazine. Whether or not you consider yourself part of this pop culture abyss, you are contributing to it. The product is a reflection of you and, more importantly, of the sub-community you identify with aesthetically, politically, and vocally.

If we hope to re-direct the future course of our culture, we must begin by re-directing the present course of our media. We must begin to understand that even the most seemingly trivial item that we present in a public space has an impact on our values and judgements.

We have given ourselves over to false logic: I *should* design on a computer because I *can* design on a computer; I *should* listen to pop music because it's *on the radio*; I *shouldn't* wear grey because it's *out* this winter. We're left with terribly designed magazines, bad radio stations, and suspect fashion.

Our culture can not reflect us until we are able to hold ourselves and each other up to *our* standard of good. We are not doing this; this is why pop culture is not cool.

It's time we raise the stakes by making our things reflect us, not the status quo. This is not about changing the world, this is about putting more thought into the things we are doing.

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COMMODIFICATION

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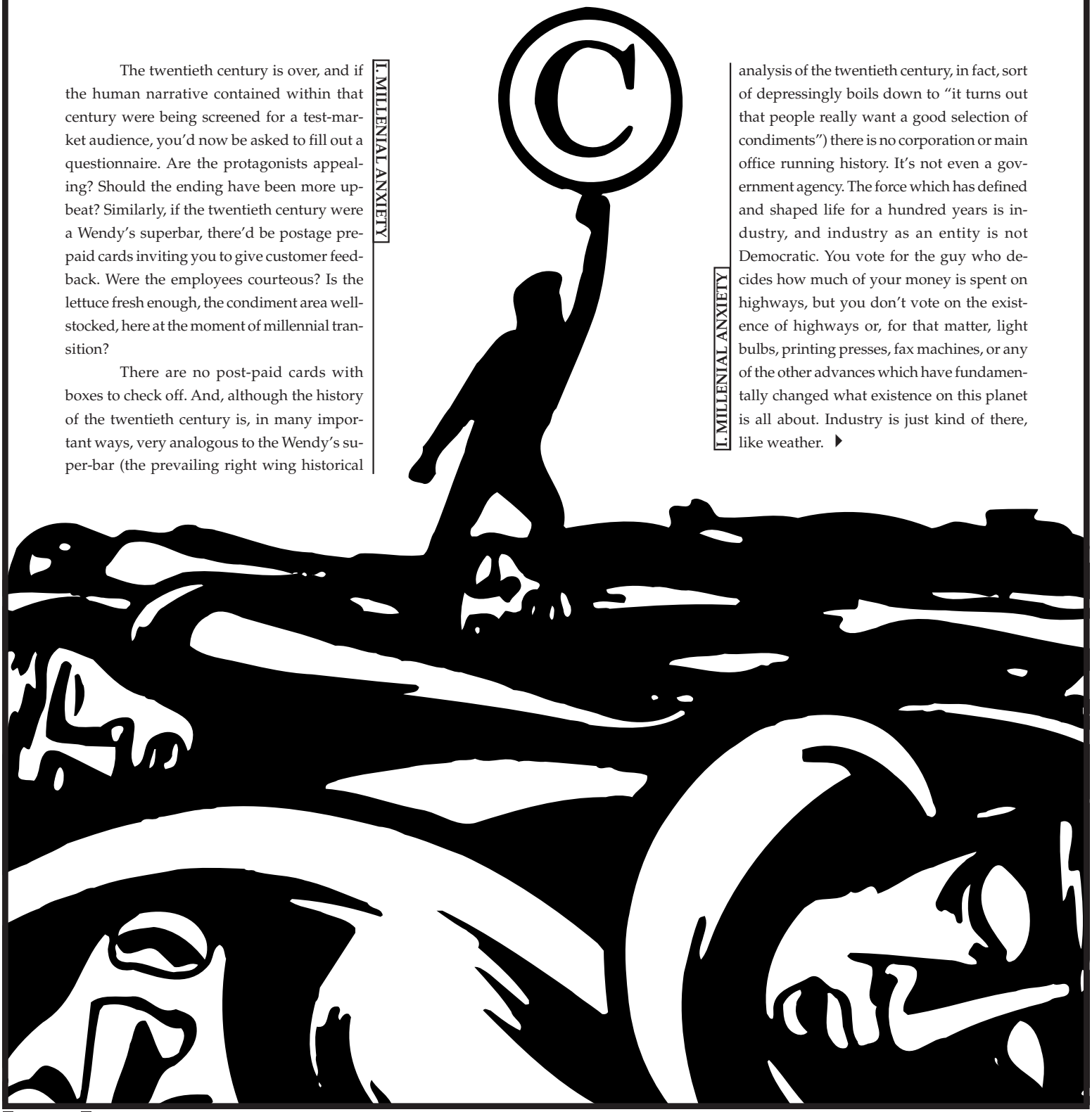
BY AL BURIAN



I. MILLENIAL ANXIETY

The twentieth century is over, and if the human narrative contained within that century were being screened for a test-market audience, you'd now be asked to fill out a questionnaire. Are the protagonists appealing? Should the ending have been more upbeat? Similarly, if the twentieth century were a Wendy's superbar, there'd be postage prepaid cards inviting you to give customer feedback. Were the employees courteous? Is the lettuce fresh enough, the condiment area well-stocked, here at the moment of millennial transition?

There are no post-paid cards with boxes to check off. And, although the history of the twentieth century is, in many important ways, very analogous to the Wendy's super-bar (the prevailing right wing historical analysis of the twentieth century, in fact, sort of depressingly boils down to "it turns out that people really want a good selection of condiments") there is no corporation or main office running history. It's not even a government agency. The force which has defined and shaped life for a hundred years is industry, and industry as an entity is not Democratic. You vote for the guy who decides how much of your money is spent on highways, but you don't vote on the existence of highways or, for that matter, light bulbs, printing presses, fax machines, or any of the other advances which have fundamentally changed what existence on this planet is all about. Industry is just kind of there, like weather. ▸

I. MILLENIAL ANXIETY

"They didn't have any cue cards for arguing against Bolsheviks in Iowa in the 1950's, and so the opposing debate squad was effectively stumped."

II. The Problem With America

The main problem we seem to have going on here in America right now is the lack of a coherent dominant ideology. (Yeah, I know, that sounds ludicrous, like an atavistic appeal to some mythical Norman Rockwell time which never existed, when we all looked, acted and spoke the same; like the legislators in Iowa who recently went so far as to declare English the "official language" there in Iowa, you know, just so the six or seven Iowans of questionable ethnicity don't get too far out of hand with their siestas and burritos and shit.) In place of the standard American statistically validated cookie-cutter existence, two-point-five kids and cars and all that, we've developed a sort of cable-TV-like endless-option culture composed of these sub-cultural blips which form the great network of a patchy, disjointed national non-identity. None of these various sub-sectors seem to be too sharply in conflict with one another in terms of having claim to cultural dominance, and none of them can, as a flip side to that coin, stake a claim to being culturally subversive, seeing as they are part and parcel of the culture they'd be trying to subvert. Besides, if your goal is subversion, how would you formulate such an attack? And what are you attacking, if there is no coherent value system to usurp?

Things were a lot more crassly laid out, and a lot easier to navigate, in the 1950's. America really had it's dominant ideology in full gear back then, and not only was normality and citizenship very unambiguously defined, it was pretty much the case that if you espoused living in any way outside of or in opposition to this norm, be it political, sexual, or facial-hair-oriented, it was generally considered a good idea to lock you up. There were political consequences to acts of social subversion, because the social and political were intimately linked, the whole thing fitting together neatly in a joint package. This package was produced and propagated by the little twittering chicka-dee of an infant culture industry, ham-fistedly broadcasting grainy black-and-white images of Wally and the Beav into the populace's homes, sending issues of Better Homes and Gardens to the suburbs, or pounding us into the ground with garishly winking honkies, who, grinning grotesquely, thrust bottles at us and spewed slogans like "Coke! It adds life!!!"

My dad was on the debate team in Iowa in high school in the 1950's. I've never been involved in any sort of formal-type debate, and unless some epic, psychologically devastating disaster occurs I never will be, but as I understand it, debate basically works itself out through a system wherein opposing debate teams read over and attempt to memorize a set of cue cards on which they've written out both points and counterpoints, for their own and the opposing view. The contest itself is thus scripted and ritualized, as one team fires off a point and the other team wracks their collective cranium for the photographic memory image of the card which explains, "if team B says..... Team A must respond by saying...." (This makes debate the second-most pointless endeavor into which children are routinely forced to participate; the number one being spelling bees: a bizarre form of competition in which strange, chromosomally-uptight parents parade out their vitamin-deficient albinos and set them off and running in pursuit of the prize for most autistic.)

The debate topic probably centered on whether Iowa should be an English-speaking territory or a full-serve state or something, but my dad, in any case, tiring of the role as impotent ambassador of some index cards' argumentation whims, decided to go for the frontal assault and abandon the cue card tactic altogether in favor of espousing Marxist-Leninism as the optimal mode for getting things done in Iowa. They didn't have any cue cards for arguing against Bolsheviks in Iowa in the 1950's, and so the opposing debate squad was effectively stumped and just sort of stood there when it was their turn to rebut, shifting their walrus-like teenage bulk about nervously and staring at the floor. Which is, technically, what it looks like when you "win" a debate, and, in fact, my dad's team had clearly whupped quad cities (or whatever) team, until the judges of the competition, who had immediately retreated to a far corner to huddle parentally and cast concerned glances back at the room, returned to their table and declared that, although technically, they had "won" the debate, they had, in actual real terms, "lost" the debate because, basically, they said something that you can't say (i.e., even though they had argued most effectively, they had come to a conclusion which was objectively wrong), and an educational institution can't reward kids for being wrong.

That's just one micro-cosmic example of a culture that defined truth in such a narrow way as to risk obliteration of the species, destroy it's own citizens' lives, and keep complex structures of race and gender inequality in place, all to further the hegemonic cultural construct of Norman Rockwellism. Because of the generally oppressive and square nature of those times, one tends to view the occasional crotchety cultural conservative who laments the passing of these simpler times (see Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, or just listen to anything Ronald Reagan ever said about anything) with contemptuous dismissal. The vast bulk of people who don't fit into the pipe-smoking, faux-British-accent world of the William F. Buckleys tend to think smugly that we sort of "won" the debate, world-historically, with the squares, when in fact we "lost" and "lost" really badly. As fucked up as the 1950's might have been, socially and politically, things are ten times more fucked up now.

III. Commodifying Culture

21st century Capitalism posits itself as the economic system which produces the most good for the most people in terms of creating the widest variety and proliferation of goods and services, including culture and its associated artifacts- these artifacts being the physical language which transmits the culture.

This argument might seem plausible in the short term scheme of things, but the general tendency of capitalist economies seems to be, in the end, to move towards homogeneity, because the *raison d'etre* of any industry is to consolidate as much wealth and economic power as possible, which leads to monopolies, and this results in the proliferation of less cultural expression and more Wal-Marts. It makes sense: industry by nature has to keep producing to expand and replicate itself. Thus, there is a drive to continually create new technologies and services which people can use to communicate, maximize comfort and convenience, and entertain themselves. The apparent democratic and populist nature of industry and specifically mass media is created by a constant creative void in the core of this industry that is always in need of filling, the one thing the machines cannot produce: the human factor, i.e., emotional or intellectual expressiveness, i.e., "art." So, initially you get a culture industry which seems noble enough in its endeavor to document, disseminate, or, at least at some level, reflect the history of human struggle for inclusion and representation, which seems to express the parameters of thought and interaction in increasingly complex and multi-faceted ways.

The problem is, though, that the free market ends up delivering infinite variations on the PBS syndrome: everyone knows that documentaries and operas are the most culturally edifying thing on TV, but somehow people would rather watch *Married with Children* anyway, and since that's just consumers casting ballots with their remote controls, and that's how the free market works, how can we argue with the premise of the historically proven nine-out-of-ten-taste-test-winning economic model? Al Bundy is a more accurate and imagination-capturing text than a Shakespeare play, this has been proven by popular consensus. The options for PBS and related institutions become: a) survival based on state funding, which means consumer tax dollars are going to TV shows with potentially little or no cleavage (although, have you checked out some of those operas? Another slant on the argument might be that the world-historical cultural triumph of *Married with Children* over opera is, in fact, just American culture coming up with more efficient and direct artistic forms for presenting cleavage), and that is exactly the kind of inefficient response to consumer needs which make planned economies such a drag; b) trying to compete as a legitimate television network, i.e.; finding corporate sponsors and generating revenue to create programs by selling off advertising space on the network. This has already happened to an extent and, let me just say, if you want a mind-meltingly succinct articulation of just how boring and homogeneous the "post-historical age" is going to be, tune into any number of

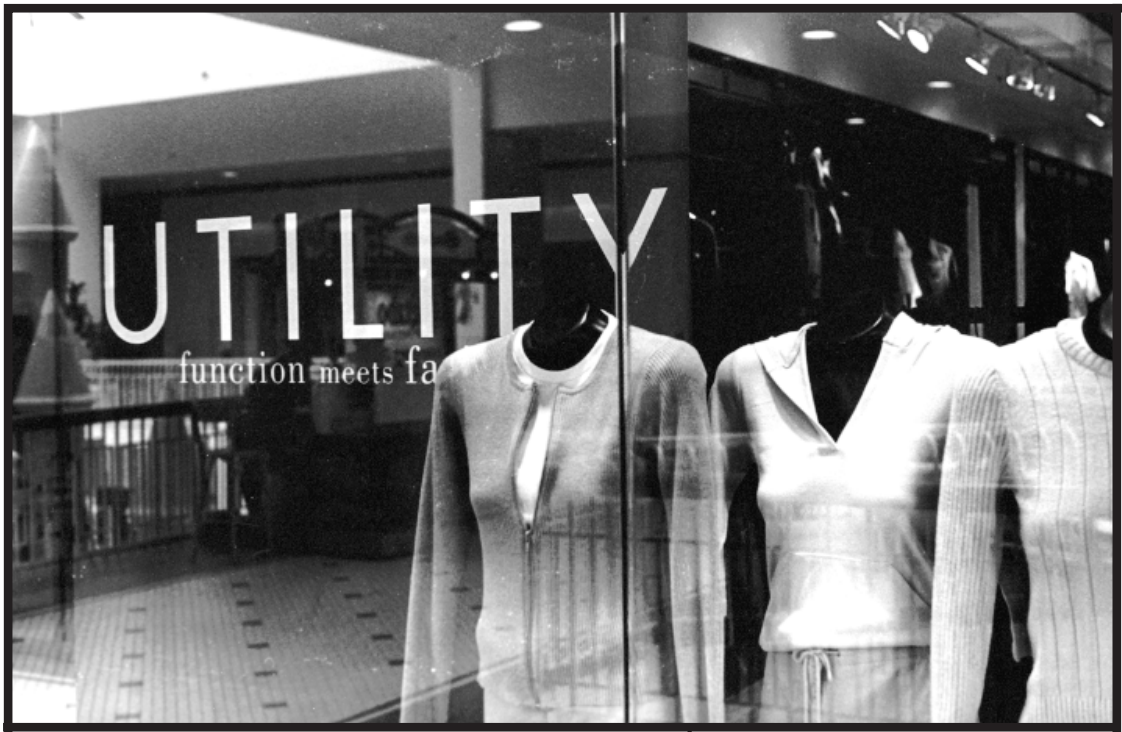
"Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life- its material plentitude, its sheer crowdedness- conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.

What is important now is that we must recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more."

-Susan Sontag

"Once a week they write me a check for shit and zero sense."

-Assfactor 4



Texaco-funded "Forbes Business Round-Up" or "Macneil-Lehrer stock-market massage circle" programs for an experience more unnerving than the most amateur, methodically mechanical pornography. It's like the powers that be at Texaco were just so excited about destroying one more organ of non-corporate information-dissemination that they didn't even have time to come up with any shows. "Fuck it, man!" I imagine some dickhead in a suit at some board meeting, frothing at the mouth, "We'll have a show! Just, like, us, wearing our suits, talking about what's really on our minds: stocks, bonds, the Dow Jones, stuff like that. It'll be great, right?" And of course the entire room is filled with other guys in suits, all slightly aroused by the prospect being laid before them, and they all agree heartily, and, the sad thing is that, unlike me and all of my friends who come up with about ten stunningly entertaining ideas for TV shows a second, these people actually have the money to then go buy just such a television show and force it upon the general population, who, I think quite sensibly, are so repulsed and beaten into bored submission that they disavow PBS forever and try to drown their sorrows in the sweet narcotic elixir of sexually titillating sit-coms and random footage of automobiles crashing. Or, c) PBS could just throw in the towel and concede defeat. Really, who watches nature shows? Besides, even when you do, the best ones are "When Animals Attack" or any Disney-produced nature show where you might get extra little animated birds or they'll hire people to stand off-camera and actually hurl the lemmings off the cliff, so that you get a nice, dramatic camera angle to mass suicide.

IV. Commodifying Counter-Culture

The plus side to having a coherently articulated dominant ideology is that it provides the opportunity to formulate a counter-argument, which is, on various levels, what began to happen in the 50's and exploded into a multitude of "counter-cultural" value systems in the 1960's. This bothered the humans who still clung to the established value system, and thus created a fair amount of societal friction. Institutionally, however, things remained pretty unaffected, because the industrial infra-structure that had been built up in World War II to build tanks under the ideological blanket of war-time ("Beat the Axis!") and that had then shifted seamlessly into production of dishwashers and televisions under new the blanket ideology of the American utopia ("Buy a house in the suburbs! We won! You deserve it!"), continued to expand its markets as new sub-cultural markets appeared. People were uptight in the 50's because they erroneously assumed that the American "way of life" somehow intimately intertwined economic prosperity with ideological cohesiveness, but the ideology, it turned out, was actually completely secondary.

Capitalism, after all, isn't a value system, it's an economic system, and one of its main features, in fact, is that it seems endlessly capable of adopting almost any cultural value system as a sub-set of its larger framework. As long as product is generated and commodities moved, anything else goes. You can vehemently condemn the status quo, articulate the sentiment as brashly and confrontationally as you can possibly conceive, but these modes of articulation inevitably express themselves in the form of commodities-if I want to join your anti-establishment cliqúe, what books do I need? What foods should I buy? What uniform designates me a member? Where do I get my ID card laminated? Do you guys have an LP out yet?

A neat little trick: this commodification neutralizes any potentially social-subversive content from the dialogue, because the exact way in which dissent is framed and articulated supports the core principle of industry, which is to produce accoutrements. If you have a movement based on rejecting the knick-knacks associated with a movement, that's a pretty motionless movement. It's like trying to construct a philosophy of life without using words. You'll probably end up grunting and gesturing a lot, probably pee and fight, maybe climb a tree or something. That's cool and all, but see, that's not a philosophy, that's just acting like a monkey.

So, we have this weird situation now where, on the surface, the "counter-cultural" idea has won this apparent victory, in that it's increasingly more acceptable to define yourself according to whatever niche you like, and the Montana survivalists make fun of the hippie communitarians who look down on the suit-and-tie Wall Street people, who are mildly annoyed by the skateboarders, who are going to rumble later this afternoon with the pot heads, who are trying to avoid the cops, who are way more busy fucking with the hip-hop kids, who grudgingly accept the lesbian couple down the street now because they watched that episode of "Ellen." Everyone, in fact, has their own culturally validating sit-com, or at least a glossy trade magazine, or, better yet, a web site, and the Norman Rockwell people are just one more sub-set of that. We make fun of them at the mall buying their Norman Rockwell prints since we're there to get an Andy Warhol poster (one of those big soup cans- industry as art! Get it?), and that's a lot cooler, but hey, don't worry, the print shop at the mall has both, so everyone's happy, essentially.

What actually happens, though, when you reach the conversational margins of what is discussible within the new elastic paradigm, is not that you lose your job or that some authority figure decrees your statement "wrong;" what happens now is that people treat you like you have a speech impediment. Your tongue is suddenly two or three times its normal size and you are convulsively trying to gurgle out something coherent, nervous stutter setting in as you note the condescending, confused looks you're receiving, the squinty little half-smiles which signify that the listeners really, really, want to know what the fuck you're talking about, they'd like to nod and go, "yeah, man, totally right on, dude," but they just can't, because they can't understand your garbled and incomprehensible syllabic spasms. By speaking in opposition to "the culture" you are clearly, by definition, being "counter-cultural," and people really want to be into that, they want to be "extreme," they want to "triple-size it" they want their life with "wild sauce" and all that, but since the values of counter-cultural transgression and multi-consumer-culturalism are pretty much the dominant ones in our society, that act of rebellion makes no sense. It's like the people who co-opted the Nike logo to use as a revolutionary symbol, printing T-shirts that said something like "Class War: Just Do It." But it's too late: Nike already stole the "Just Do It" concept from you in the first place, indelibly associating free will and spontaneity with overpriced footwear produced by malnourished children in sweatshops.

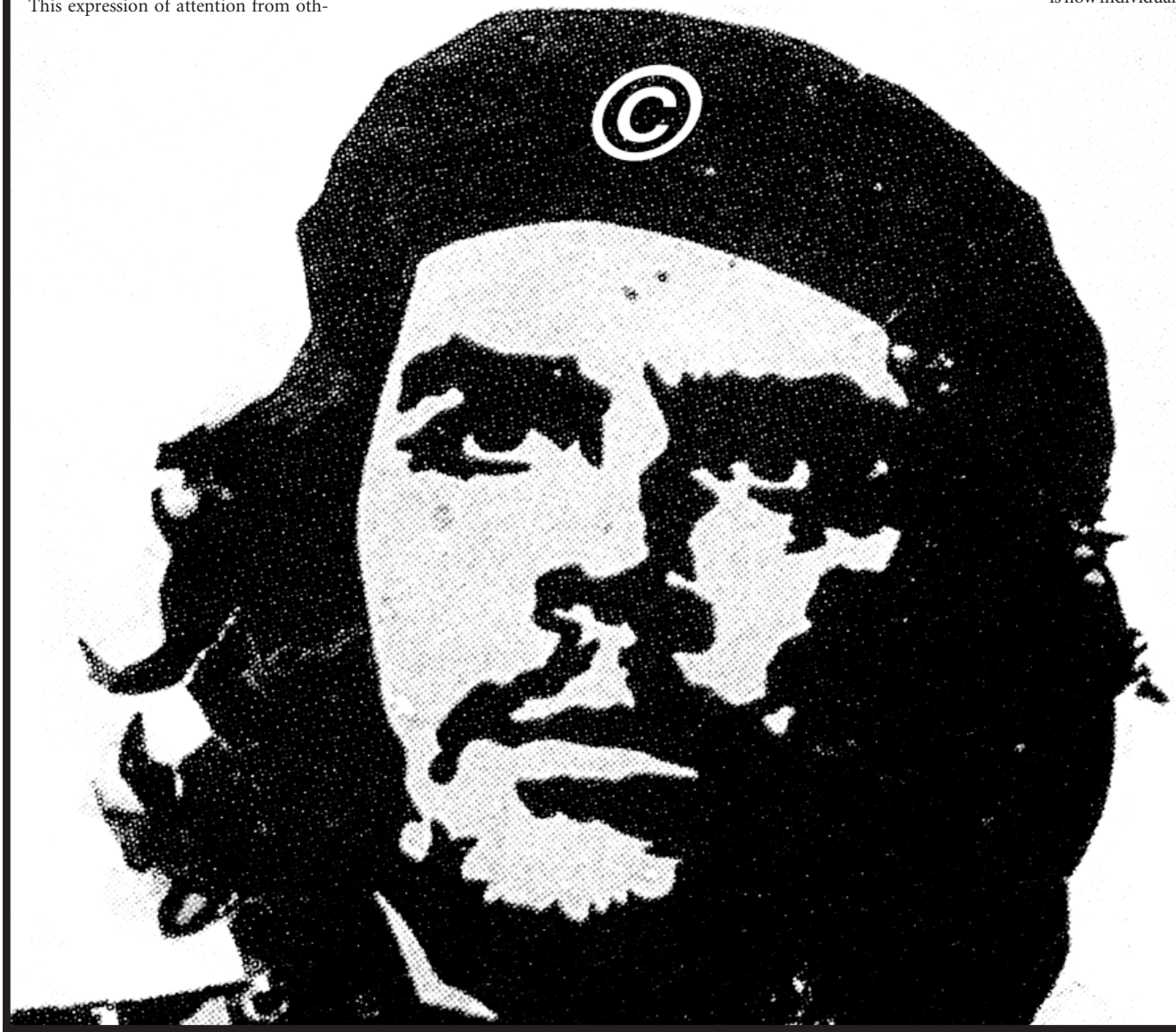
The counter-cultural ideal, articulated in opposition to the square culture of post-war America, whatever its particular manifestations, boiled down to an overall package of personal liberation that anyone should be able to do, and by extension, "be" anything they wanted to. The conglomeration of beatniks, Black Panthers, Maoists, Trotskyists, Anarchists, Feminists, free-lovers, junkies, etc., etc., all espoused, in their proliferation as a free-form amoeba of general "subversive thought," the general counter-cultural ideal of "more options," each with their own specific shock-value addendums to prove what radical thinkers they really were. "More options," it turns out, is perfectly in line with capitalism, obviously, and the counter-cultural argument, it turns out, boils down to "ABC and NBC are not enough. They do not express my totality. I need cable." The counter-culture won; it is now the culture. We now all have cable. Hey, the more channels, the more chances of catching some "subversive shit," right?

The question, then, clearly becomes how you react to this, if, in fact, you are uncool with the way things seem to be going at this point in human history, which is that self-determination of our lives has been replaced by self-determination of lifestyle, and meanwhile, increasingly complex technological-industrial complexes harvest resources in ever-increasingly inefficient ways in order to continue frenziedly pumping out lifestyle-accessorizing products that allow you, at best, to express your "individuality" only in the most general and herd-like ways, like being into "South Park" and thinking that people who like "The Simpsons" are so two seasons ago. How do you express being against the world-historical victory of "more options?"

V. Commodifying People

Every person is, to a greater or lesser extent, involved in the assertion of their own cultural prerogatives, be it through painting a beautiful painting, speaking eloquently, wearing a lamp shade on your head and pulling your pants down at a party, swearing like a sailor- whatever your preferred mode of expression is, your "statement" of self, once you've expressed it recognizably, immediately a little © appears next to the image of you with that lamp shade on your head and people go, "Ah, yes! Wearing a lamp shade on your head: © al burian, 1999." This expression of attention from others in relation to your statement of self can take various forms, but as a general rule it befuddles the espouser, who stands in the headlight-glare of his or her new-found brand-recognizability and goes "Huh huh huh," sort of retardedly, unsure of how to deal with the spotlight. The light feels warm though, it feels good. Because it feels good the person in question will tend to forget the initial statement of self entirely, concentrating attention instead on repetition of the name brand. Thus, even if wearing the lamp shade was initially intended as an angry and subversive social commentary on people's passive dousing of their own internal light bulbs in the face of fascism's steady encroachment on their lives, once everyone applauds and says, "bitchin'!" the whole scenario changes. All of a sudden, you're showing up every week at some party, pulling the same old lamp shade gag. This works out well for a while, and everyone is amped when the "lamp shade guy" turns up, but the joke gets old fast, and, craving that warm feeling, you continue more and more desperately to wear bigger and bigger lamp shades, or try wearing a toaster on your head or something, anything; anything to keep milking the formula, which has boiled itself down to a gross crack-cocaine-like substance, the naked urge to keep attention focused on yourself by any means you can contrive. Anyone who develops a success formula is sad to see, because you just watch them repeat it with decreasing success for the rest of their life.

When you produce an artifact, regardless of intent or attempt at intent, it immediately becomes subject to interpretation by a culture which has only one interpretation. No statement can ever overshadow the implicit statement in making a statement: "I am a person who makes statements." There it is: the ©. This is how individuals become commodities.



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"You work for slightly more than minimum wage all the time, and there's these gigantic corporations literally paying out money in huge burlap sacks and all they ask is that you do stuff which is actually a lot more stimulating and engaging than pumping gas!"

6. The Futility of Producing Counter-Cultural Commodities

I have somewhat of a personal stake in this (though, I guess, who doesn't), specifically because I am self-identified as a cultural producer and member of a sub-culture which was killed right before my eyes: the indigenous culture of suburban disaffiliation, punk rock. I remember the moment I glimpsed the corpse: I was driving around the beltway of Raleigh, North Carolina, in a van, lost, beginning to feel the stirrings of panic as the same exit I had seen a couple of times already rumbled past in the ever-slowing molasses-interlock of congealing rush hour artery-clogging. Five O'clock: Research Triangle Park, proud to boast the highest per capita density of PhD's anywhere in the charted universe, most of whom are focusing their monolithic cranial capacity on fine-tuning the amount of anal leakage, oh, I'm sorry, the euphemism is "loose stool," caused by synthetic and undigestible fat-substitutes so that Americans can continue to deep-fry as many things as possible without their actual internal organs coming to too closely resemble the clogged arteries and exploding hearts that their rush-hour beltways evoke as a result of their cholesterol-reducing research, causing one to wonder, which is the metaphor, the heart attack or the traffic jam?

Raleigh, North Carolina is a terrible place to need to get, say, a speaker re-coned or something. Inevitably, somehow you end up having to go there on some errand, consulting the maps and diagrams in advance, swearing to yourself, I am not a hick from a small town with two main streets, I can go to a medium-sized city and navigate it without getting hopelessly lost for several hours. Wishful thinking, always hopelessly over-optimistic, and as rush hour set in that day and I found myself resigned once again to at least another hour in the metal box of my choice, breathing in carbon monoxide, I turned for solace to the radio. That is Raleigh's saving grace: as much as I think it blows there, they do have this totally killer metal station. It is killer both for the obvious reason, which is that you get to hear metal, but more specifically, it is killer because, just as when in Rome one is advised to do as the Romans, so when in Raleigh you might as well really get into the whole ambiance of the sprawling decentralized shopping mall wasteland by listening, as you traverse this barren plain, to what becomes contextually the ideal soundtrack to the modern-day river Styx known as the 440 beltway, the grating staccato blur of rednecky muscle rock.

Five O'clock, a summer day, circa 1993 or so, and the DJ comes on the radio to announce the Five O'clock Rock Block (hey, it rhymes) will this afternoon consist of five songs by a punk rock band. As they proceeded to play this band on the Raleigh metal station, a strange train-wreckage of culture confluence, something which I had never heard or expected to hear, I was suddenly brought face to face with the daunting and ludicrous fact that, up until that moment, somewhere deep down I had actually believed that music like this was somehow inherently subversive; that, as I sat in the basement of some dorm taping the exact records now being offered up as rush-hour pacification from the record library of my college radio station, I convinced myself that if ever the day came when a band like this was played on the Raleigh metal station, all hell would break loose, motorists would be having instantaneous brain aneurysms on the 440 beltway, groups of people would band together and begin looting and destroying the shopping malls, and within the span of a five-song "rock block" a glorious people's insurrection would coagulate, rushing in to overthrow patriarchy and institutional oppression and create a worker's utopia based on fairness and free expression of individual will. I thought that this inherent subversion was proven *de facto* by the very nonexistence of such music being played on the radio; as if it's absence amounted to censorship, which amounted to an admission of fear and trembling before it's ideological might on the part of the Powers That Be.

Five songs later, stuck in immobile gridlock, my basic aesthetic principle proven wrong by some Raleigh DJ sitting in an air-conditioned studio applying wax to his curly schlong, and here I am, in rush hour, on account of an amp speaker I've been driving around trying to get re-coned so that I can begin the task of methodically destroying this speaker again, by playing punk rock music through it, leading in turn to future amp retubings and speaker reconings, all of which is just part of myself maintaining my status as consumer of audio-repair goods and services.

So here we are, one more lifestyle option in a kaleidoscopic panorama of meaningless lifestyle choices. There is a mural in my home town which depicts what I gather is supposed to be a cross-section of the citizens of the town, marching arm in arm down the street, in a display of civic unity. Among the students, shop-owners, artists, businessmen, athletes, etc. there is a cigarette smoking punk rocker, surly snarl on his face, sporting a mohawk and with a skull tattooed on the side of his head. How can anyone even contemplate being a punk rocker now? What kind of rebellion is it when the town has made a public declaration of how quaint and cute you are?

7. The Futility of Producing Anything

I do, honestly, believe that I am surrounded by some of the most brilliant and dynamic minds of my generation, but unfortunately I also feel quite acutely that this fact does not amount to shit. Brilliance and dynamism are quantifiable and I'm not in charge of quantifying. If it turns out that the people I know are the Vincent Van Goghs and Ernest Hemmingways of the future, that just means that somewhere along the line someone found a way to package them effectively, or that they have packaged themselves effectively. If they aren't packaged, they might as well not exist, since no one will ever know of their brilliance and thus the world will continue to believe that *Beavis and Butthead* is actually the best possible cartoon humanity can produce, that those guys are the funniest, most astute social critics in existence. Many of my friends will actually end up writing jokes for *Beavis and Butthead* or utilizing their vast megatonage of artistic talent to draw pictures of Bon Jovi shaking his greasy mane around so that other friends of mine can eventually focus their titanic telescopically insightful brains on writing the following profound insights into the human condition:

Beavis: Dude looks like a lady, dude.
Butthead: Shut up, Beavis.
Butthead: huh huh huh.

This is going to be a big disappointment for me personally. I would like to see my peers evolving new subcultures which don't have names, which exist merely on secret handshakes. The old names are confusing and meaningless, and that's fine, let them remain just so, because the moment you label what you are doing, pin it down and define its parameters, you kill it, because it can now have a universal product code attached to it.

Of course, it's a lot more likely that they'll just continue their current trend of increasingly justifying their immoral whoring behavior at the hands of gigantic corporations on the basis of those corporations giving them a lot of money. Which is fine, it's the world's oldest profession, one of the few basic economic arrangements left largely untouched by the ultra-rapid technological expansions which have careened us screaming to this millennial angst salad bar, but still, I wish these people would stop acting like they've really pulled one over on Them because they got paid to work. The whole problem of conceptualizing yourself as a subversive persona is that the only truly subversive act is not to take that money. The money is how THEY subvert YOU. "But, Al, you dumb ass," they say, meaning it in the nicest possible way, "you work for slightly more than minimum wage all the time, and there's these gigantic corporations literally paying out money in huge burlap sacks and all they ask is that you do stuff which is actually a lot more stimulating and engaging than pumping gas!" Well, yeah. Of course corporations have a lot of money. That's the whole problem- they are gigantic corporations who buy out everyone with any creativity and integrity and make them a serf in the service of their core project, which is making everything as homogeneous and crappy as possible. Or to paraphrase it in religious nut terminology(in case there are any remaining religious nuts in the audience): You think when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden his sales pitch was, "Hey, try this apple! It's really mealy and bitter tasting, and there's just as good food right down the way which God WON'T punish you for eating!" Not much of a temptation, is it? If they weren't offering you something really good it wouldn't be an act of resistance to refuse it. It would be one of those feel-good displays of social conscience play-acting, like going to the health food store and buying the vegetarian entrée, or recycling the packaging from your TV dinner.

Satan walks amongst my peers, doling out candy bars and Pop Tarts. If you do take their money, you better do something pretty awe-inspiring with it. Even then, you won't have excused yourself, because whatever you do, you've already displayed your ability to be bought, and anyway, you'll probably just buy a sandwich or a stereo with it. We'll still get along OK; I'll talk to you at parties and such. Just don't tell me about all the killer subversive shit you're going to do, you're planning to do, you and your friends have been talking about doing. I find that really depressing. ■

I. Media as a Constructed Reality

The message of the media is always what the messenger wants you to see. The relationship between the portrayed and the portrayer can never be forgotten. It is artistic in the sense that a stimulus is being absorbed, manipulated, and finally (re)presented. A commissioned artist has the freedom to manipulate her subject in any capacity so long as the commissioner considers the finished product acceptable. Because the commission of the artist depends on the commissioner's interpretation of acceptable, the artist is never at absolute freedom to present the subject as she interprets it, regardless of the amount of freedom the commissioner agrees to. Truth can never co-exist with restriction. It is this juxtaposition of freedom with acceptability which automatically destroys the notion of truth, altering its lexical definition to that of acceptable truth.

It is under these terms that we can begin to understand the relationship of product to worker, as well as that of truth to owner; and it is from this point that we can begin to examine the relationship between media and viewer.

II. Advertising as a Conditional Present

The principles of any single advertisement are constructed by the intent of all advertising: to convince the viewer that she would be better off if she had the advertiser's product or service. It is because of this that all ads must address the viewer in the future conditional tense: "*If* you bathed with our soap, you *would be* more lovable." "*If* you bought our life insurance, your future *would be* more secure."

This manipulation forces the viewer to reassess her immediate surroundings. The success of the ad depends on the viewer's response: if she finds the solicitation to offer a more alluring world, it works and the product succeeds.

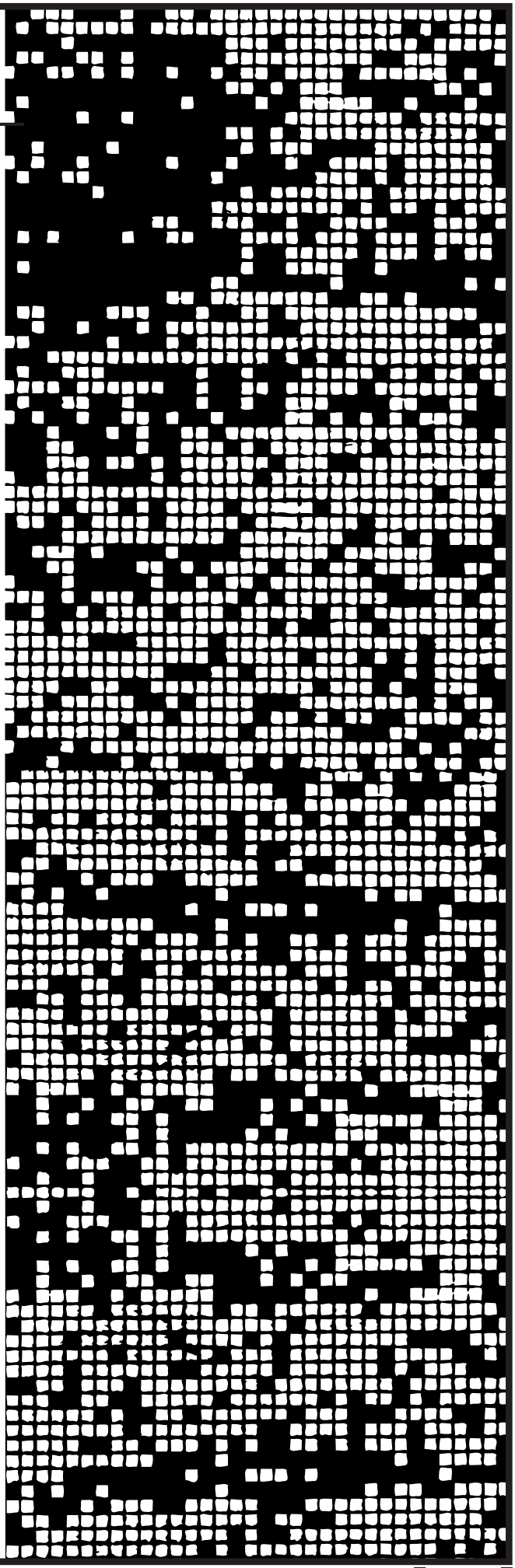
Ads represent a connection to happiness expressed through a product, and, although it sounds devilishly backhanded, advertising is not inherently evil; the harm surfaces in deceptive advertising: the marketing of pharmaceuticals as a *replacement* for happiness; automobiles as a symbol of *fun*; diamonds as a metaphor of *trust*.

So now comes the big question: Why has Prozac become the contemporary cure-all? Why is Manpower Temp Agency the largest employer in the world? Why so many two-wheel-drive SUVs? Why are people buying into these things?

Predictably enough, the answers have relatively little to do with people's relation to actual products, and even less to do with their intellect. What matters is not *which* sweater is being sold at any given time (the models constantly change), but that we become convinced that we *need* a new sweater, even if we have ten extras in our closet.

This is not a question of any particular product; it's an open diagnosis of the way products in general have been related to our lives. The presentation of products is advertising; our relation to the presentation is cognition- how we perceive and understand stimuli.

Large-scale pharmaceutical advertising has exploded in the last few years, consciously encouraging the public that it's OK for medicine to be used as a *lifestyle* enhancer. Unlike the sweater that only promises warmth, you



We have come to the turning point where this is the final recognition: the only way to make our space less crowded is to initially overcrowd it to the point of suffocation.

can now buy a product that guarantees the exact emotion you are in search of! It sounds great, but there are always the metaphorical [and sometimes extremely concrete] side effects that the advertisers attempt to gloss over.

The root problem is this enigmatic, mythical *quality of life* that people crave. They desire so much to attain an unattainable end (be it weight, wealth, style, etc.) that they are willing to compromise their logic in order to buy the empty signifiers of such a life. The end result is the new skirt or bottle of pills or home theatre. Advertisers strive to attach this alluring but unattainable ideal to their products. In doing so, they commodify our very being, making us a product of their products.

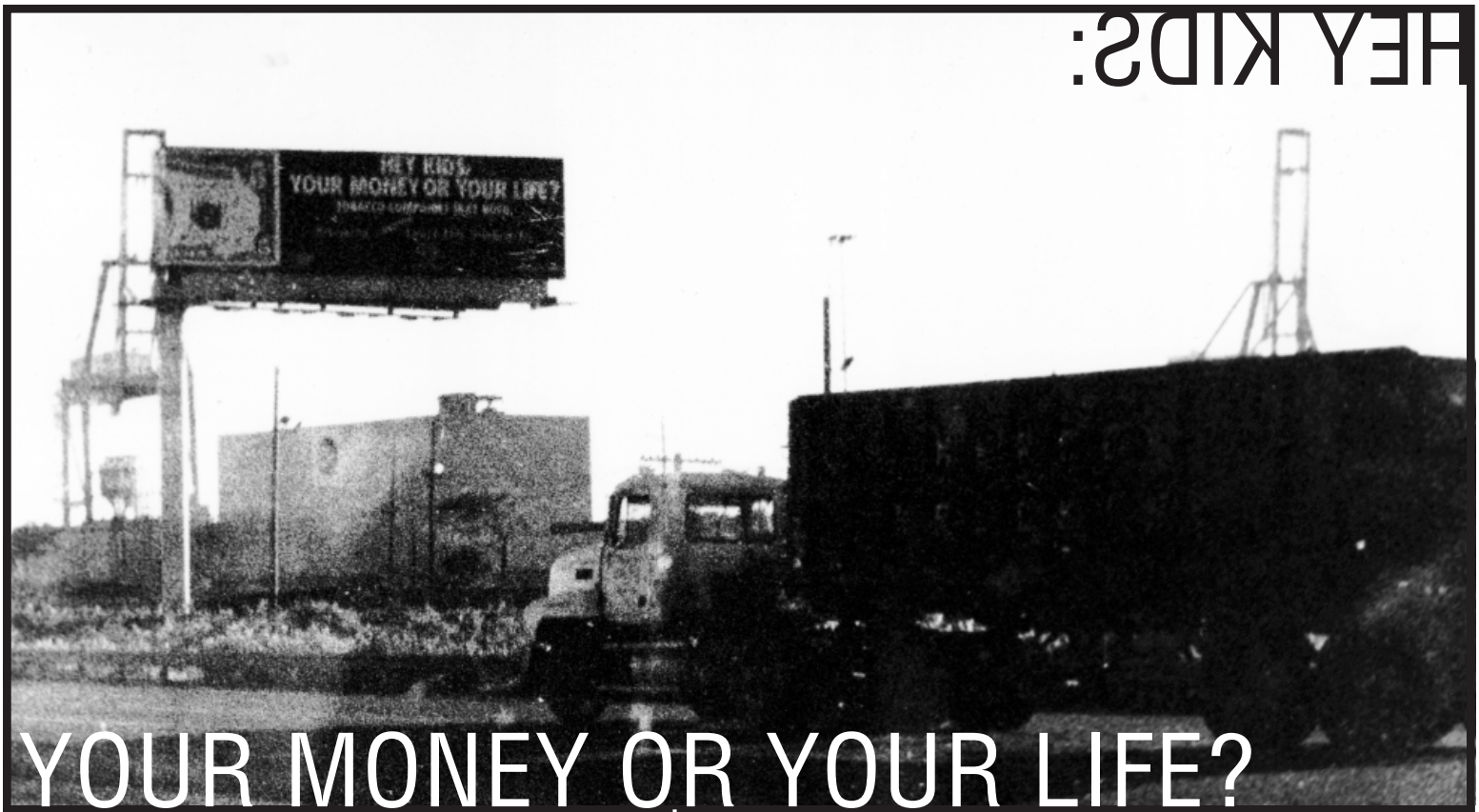
III. The Need to Reconstruct Reality

Big market advertising has infiltrated our lives and numbed our senses, blurring the line between the way we live and the way the advertisements say we should live. Marketing and sales have positioned themselves at the forefront of defining popular culture, which inherently subverts the lexical idea that popular culture is a reflection *of* mass culture. Businesses have created our pop culture and played us into believing that their sales schemes and merchandise are products of *our* culture, not the other way around. There is an explicit need to redefine truth in this context: to regain control in our world.

IV. Defining the New Media

The practice of politics for the sake of politics is dead in America. The interest has shifted from traditional politics to an ambiguously inoffensive term: personal politics (don't personal decisions define political practice?). With this recognition, the success of the New Media will rest in its ability to effectively present the consumer with counter-images to mainstream advertising. It must work towards the deconstruction of social norms (image with product, slogan with corporation, stigma with event, body image with product, etc.) and industrial philosophies (industry with social consciousness v. industry in actual practice), in a manner which encourages the viewer to question the practices of the consumer, and, by extension, the producer. The New Media must break down the political into the personal in order to reach the targeted group effectively.

We have entered a time in which the people opposed to manipulative advertising and corporate dominance must turn to the very institutions they oppose as a means of reform. We have come to the turning point where this is the final recognition: the only way to make our space less crowded is to initially overcrowd it to the point of suffocation. This can not be achieved solely by image de-construction or culture-jamming, but must initiate a new school of thought in which all media is deconstructed, analyzed, and reassembled. We must begin to demand closer representations of the truth in all our media, from magazines to pop songs to product packaging. This idea of the New Media is the concept of a movement that screams for truth as loudly and adamantly as Coca-Cola screams for sales.



YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE?

As the newest wave of anti-tobacco propaganda is settling into the backyards of cities across America, it's becoming apparent that the state-employed ad agencies responsible for the propaganda are sparing no one in their crusade to end cigarette consumption. The pictured billboard is but one in a vast chain sprawled along the New Jersey Turnpike that reads: "Hey Kids! Your Money or Your Life?"

Renowned for decades of subversive advertising, the cigarette industry has now follen prey to its own folly: an unflinching campaign of misleading ads that deceptively promoted a product exclusively designed to kill you. The problem was never with the health side of the issue (plenty of products are designed to have a similar effect and are rarely scrutinized), but with the approach of the industry- the glamourization and cartoon-marketing- in conjuction with a seemingly bottomless budget.

What we are now seeing appear in retaliation to decades of pro-cigarette banter bears striking resemblance to the original monster in terms of budget, ambiguity, and target marketing. While the new wave of this advertising has a fundamentally different goal (it is actually de-advertising cigarettes), the less-obvious similarity is haunting: these people are still maintaining a deeply flawed approach.

Alluding to the dismal line that made the cover of *Newsweek* half a decade ago ("Your Shoes or Your Life"), this billboard is appealing to one of the rawest human emotions (fear), while targeting children and subconsciously promoting violence, or at least the idea of violence. If you're coming at this thing from a humanistic perspective, this is not a good idea.

After this year's shocking spree of youth killings, one would assume that any reference to violence as a youth marketing ploy (be it to sell *or* un-sell a product) would qualify as tasteless- even unconscionable. One must remember that this sell tactic was officially banned from cigarette advertising for a reason. Apparently, the government has decided that their own rules don't apply to their propaganda.

ADVERTISING

THE MODERN CULT OF POP CULTURE

Both Jhally and Twitchell argue that advertising works as a form of religion, that it has even supplanted religion as the key institution of our time. And yet Jhally and Twitchell come to opposite conclusions about what all this means. Jhally says advertising is destroying society; Twitchell says it's holding it together.

Sut Jhally and James Twitchell consider advertising to be the central meaning-maker in our culture, the key storyteller; both concern themselves not with what advertising is supposed to do-sell stuff-but what it does while doing it; for them, whether advertising sells goods or not is largely beside the point. Both argue that advertising works as a form of religion, that it has even supplanted religion as the key institution of our time. And yet Jhally and Twitchell come to opposite conclusions about what all this means. Jhally says advertising is destroying society; Twitchell says it's holding it together.

I asked Sut and James to participate in a sort of laissez-faire debate, mailed them a list of questions, and arranged a three-way conference call.

Sut Jhally is a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst where he founded the Media Education Foundation. Author of ***Codes of Advertising***, ***Dreamworlds I & II***, and ***Advertising and the End of the World*** (the latter two are videos), Marxist, Critic, Straight Man, he's a passionate and incredibly articulate speaker. One gets the idea from talking to him that Jhally studies advertising not because it's hip but important.

James Twitchell teaches at the University of Florida and is author of ***Adcult***, ***Carnival Culture***, and this summer's ***Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*** (Columbia). Prolific as all get out, a new book, ***Twenty Ads That Shook The World***, is already in the pipeline for next year, and he's currently working on another about the concept of luxury. Unlike Jhally, Twitchell writes for the lay reader. He's witty, sharp, and prone to pithy aphorisms-not unlike an ad man. As a vocal defender of advertising, he's far too likable. One gets the idea from talking to him that Twitchell studies advertising not only because it's important but also because it's fun.

As far as I'm concerned, the greatest thing Sut Jhally and James Twitchell have in common is that they both scare me (or, rather; the thought of having to debate them does).

-CM (Thanks to Marilyn McNeal and John Nolt for transcribing)

This interview originally appeared in Stay Free! #16. Re-printed with permission by Stay Free!, Sut Jhally, and James Twitchell. Stay Free! subscriptions are $10 from Stay Free! PO Box 306 Prince St. Station NYC 10012
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★: What's your agenda? What are you trying to accomplish?

JHALLY: As a social scientist, I am interested in the question of determination-what structures the world and how we live in it. To understand the modern world requires some perspective on advertising. For me, the function of knowledge is to provide people with tools to see the world in different ways and to be able to act and change the world. I work with Marx's aphorism: philosophers help us understand the world, but the point is to change it. If that's not the function of universities, I don't know why we exist. If it's simply to reproduce knowledge about the world or train people for jobs, why bother?

TWITCHELL: I agree with most of that. Advertising is the lingua franca by which we communicate our needs and desires and wants. Not to take it seriously is not to do our job. I was intrigued by advertising first as a scholar of language and literature. I was amazed by how little my students knew about literature compared to advertising. Almost in a flash, I realized I was neglecting this great body of material while the material I was teaching seemed, to them, unimportant. I jumped tracks then and moved from high culture to commercial culture.

These are tracks, incidentally, not just in American culture but in world culture as well. We are now living in a world informed by language about things. It's not the

world that I knew and studied-the world about thoughts and feelings in terms of literature—or the world that preceded that one, which was a world about language and religion.

JHALLY: So, do you use advertising as a way of doing literary analysis?

TWITCHELL: I look at it like this: We've turned our noses up at the material world and pretended it was not really important. Clearly, for most people, most of the time, the material is the world. They live in terms of mass-produced objects. How we understand those objects is, to a great degree, what commercial interests decide to say about them. So I'm not just looking at linguistic aspects. I'm interested in why the material world has been so overlooked. Why has it been so denigrated? Why are we convinced that happiness can't come from it? Why do those of us in our fifties warn the generation behind us to stay away from this stuff?

"The point is you've already made your brand choices. You probably use the same toothpaste. You probably have a highly routinized consumptive life. You're not as interesting to an advertiser as an eighteen-year-old who has not made these choices."

JHALLY: The material world was for many years ignored, but not by Marxists. In fact, Marx starts off Capital with an analysis of the material world. He says capitalism has transformed the material world, and, in that sense, it's a revolutionary society. Marx thought that capitalism has a lot of very literary and progressive things because it blew away the repression of feudalism.
The left has often been criticized for not looking at the material world, but they focus almost entirely on production. What they've really left out is culture. They've regarded it as secondary and so Western Marxism has tried to re-address that imbalance. The reason I am interested in advertising, coming out of that tradition, is that advertising links those two things together. It allows us to speak about both the material world and the world of symbolism and culture.

Jim, you were saying that we are always preaching that happiness doesn't come from things and we should be less moralistic. My view is driven by political factors, not moral ones. I think we should ask empirical questions. Does happiness come from things? Has more happiness given us more things? If it has, what are the costs of that? The evidence is that material things do not deliver the type of happiness that the system says they should deliver.

TWITCHELL: Is there a system that does deliver more happiness? If so, why hasn't it elbowed its way through and pushed this system aside?

JHALLY: The other systems don't exist. I certainly couldn't point to anything based on what is called the Marxian tradition. The Soviet Union was a dungeon. China is not quite the same dungeon but . . . a better system lies in the future. The whole point of doing this type of analysis is to imagine what a system would look like that catered to human needs. That's why I look at advertising. What does advertising stress as a system? What are the values? Advertising doesn't say happiness comes only from things. It says you can get friendship through things. You can get family life through things. Things are used as a medium. Advertisers are really smart. They've realized since the 1920s that things don't make people happy, that what drives people is a social life.

TWITCHELL: In that case, maybe they are doing what most people want, loading value into things. You may not like the amount of money they make or you may think the process is environmentally wicked, but aren't they delivering what people want and need?

JHALLY: No! Advertisers are delivering images of what people say they want connected to the things advertisers sell. If you want to create a world focused on family, focused on community, focused on friendship, focused on independence, focused on autonomy in work, then capitalism would not be it. In fact, what you have in advertising, I believe, is a vision of socialism. And that vision is used to sell these things called commodities. If you wanted to create the world according to the values advertising focuses on, it would look very different. That's where a progressive movement should start. It should take the promises of advertising seriously and say, "Look, if you want this world, what do we have to do to ensure that these values are stressed instead of the values of individualism and greed and materialism?"

TWITCHELL: But advertising doesn't stress greed and materialism.

JHALLY: Well, it's about individual desires.

TWITCHELL: Maybe advertising excludes communal desires because they are not as high on most people's agendas as they are for those of us in our fifties. Maybe most people are not as interested in the things we say we are interested in such as family and community. Maybe they are more interested in individual happiness.

JHALLY: That's a fair question. We can't answer it yet, though, because advertising dominates so much that it leaves little room for alternative visions. My major problem with advertising is not the vision that it gives out. There are many positive things within that and that's what attracts people. Part of my problem with advertising is its monopolization of the cultural field. The questions you are asking can only be answered when you have a space in the culture where alternative values can be articulated. Then perhaps we can see what people's real values and preferences are because, at that point, they've had some choice. They have the alternative values expressed in as powerful and creative a form as the values that advertisers express.

TWITCHELL: Why aren't there enough people like you in positions of cultural power? Why haven't these people, these silent but passionate people, been able to make their concerns known? Is it because the advertising culture is so powerful that it squeezes them into silence?

JHALLY: It's the way power operates. Some of us have more power and visibility than others. It depends on what degree your values link up with the people who control the cultural system.

TWITCHELL: Don't we control part of that system, the schools? Why have we done such a poor job?

JHALLY: I don't think we've done a poor job. The academy is the only place where there is independent thinking. That's why the Right and business have targeted it. The universities are the only place where these discussions take place. The Right complains about how the universities have been taken over by Leftists. To some extent, that's nonsense because most academics are fairly innocuous conservatives.

TWITCHELL: They are? Not at the schools I've been at.

JHALLY: There's a visible minority, but most of my colleagues are quite ordinary people. And the tendency is to focus on liberal academics and leave out the larger academic community: the scientists and business schools. . . . But when there is a choice, students will choose those ideas. Our ideas are popular on campuses because it is one place where they can be expressed. It is one of the few places where there is competition between ideas.

TWITCHELL: Then why do these ideas lose their steam when students leave the campus?

JHALLY: When people leave school, they have to figure out what they're going to do. They're $30,000 in debt. That's one of the great tricks of American capitalism; to get loyalty is to get people into debt early.

TWITCHELL: So this is the indenture system simply made more modern? You and I have completely different views of the same nest. My view is that these ideas don't really hold sway with our students, only our colleagues.

JHALLY: That's not my experience at all. When people are exposed to this, they have a couple of responses. The main one is, "Wow, this is overwhelming. I don't know what to do." So when people ask me what to do, I say that's not my job. Education provides the tools to think and understand the world. It is up to them to figure out what to do with that. Of course, once outside the university, you've got to have some community working in the same ways, otherwise you are indirectly isolated. This is not strictly evil capitalism; this is also the Left not building the kinds of institutions that provide people support. They don't exist, and you can either be an active or passive participant in building them.

TWITCHELL: So you are part of the solution or you're the problem.

JHALLY: Well, I don't think there is any such thing as being innocent in a world that is being constantly constructed.

TWITCHELL: Do you feel marginalized?

JHALLY: Sure. To some degree.

TWITCHELL: You have books that have been published.

JHALLY: Do I have as much power as

Peter Jennings?

TWITCHELL: No. Should you? Do you have a pretty face? Can you read well?

JHALLY: Should that matter?

TWITCHELL: In television, absolutely.

JHALLY: Well, it matters in a system that's built on television ratings and keeping advertisers happy. But why must debate and media always be along those lines?

TWITCHELL: All these media are driven by the same machinery, the audience that can be delivered to advertisers: So it's skewed away from certain kinds of people who do not consume and it's pushed toward people who are massive consumers. It's pushed away from Sut and myself. We feel, Sut especially, feels

JHALLY: I totally disagree. It doesn't have anything to do with ideas. It's got to do with access. Americans gave away the broadcast system to advertisers in 1934, which meant that everything was going to be dependent on advertising revenues rather than public service.

TWITCHELL: What about PBS?

JHALLY: Public broadcasting is a great idea. I wish we could have it. PBS was always envisioned as entertainment for the elite rather than an alternative to commercial TV. It's possible to do public interest programming and be popular. Look at England. The BBC is driven by a different set of economic logics and produces different types of programs. That's why Masterpiece Theatre looks so different than the dreck that comes out from the networks. It's not because the Brits are more artistic. The BBC operates within a system of public service.

should have this delivered to us?" Why don't they essentially force it through the system? I think it's because if you observe what they consume, you'll see that it's not what they say they want but is really the popular stuff that other people like.

JHALLY: Well, there are two issues here. One is diversity. Do you think diversity is a good thing to have in American media? The other issue is why hasn't this happened? That is an issue of power. Those are two separate questions. One is a question of value, the other is how you make it come about. There are more and more people who are starting to participate in collective movements and trying to bring about a different kind of culture. And I think education is the first step of that.

TWITCHELL: Well, I say more power to them. That is exactly what should be happening.

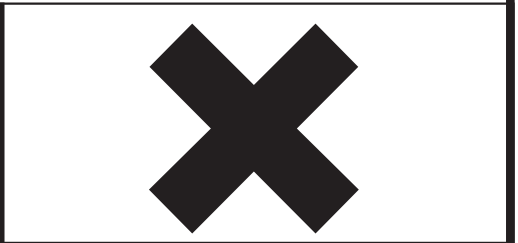
JHALLY: And that is what is happening.

wasteful expenditure, and the cruelest exploitation in terms of how these stones are mined. And they're completely worthless. I mean, at least Nike makes good shoes!

You would say, 'Boy, I rest my case," but I say, "Is there any other explanation?" The explanation, I think, is the need to make ceremony, to fetishize moments of great anxiety. You can actually see them colonizing these moments later in life; now they're saying the ten-year anniversary or the twenty-year anniversary demands a whole new panoply of these otherwise worthless stones.

JHALLY: Sure, I agree with all of that. Advertising caters to deep human needs. People's relationship with objects is what defines us as human beings. The diamond example illustrates the power of advertising, but it's ultimately about how many goods are sold, which I don't think is a good way of measuring. Advertising can be

"...it takes real needs and desires and says they are only possible by purchasing products. So what's real about advertising is its appeals. What's false about advertising is the answers it provides to those appeals."



marginalized.

JHALLY: Actually, in that sense, I feel targeted.

TWITCHELL: You're not targeted the way an eighteen-year-old is.

JHALLY: I have a lot of disposable income.

TWITCHELL: I'm not concerned about money. The point is you've already made your brand choices. You probably use the same toothpaste. You probably have a highly routinized consumptive life. You're not as interesting to an advertiser as an eighteen-year-old who has not made these choices. We see this when we look around. We see this great dreck of vulgarity that is being pumped out of Hollywood and the television networks and even in books. It's clear that this is not making me feel important, but I sometimes think, well, maybe that's the price you pay in a world where getting Nielsen ratings or getting on the best-seller list is crucial. Now, we're back to Peter Jennings. Peter Jennings' ideas-if those can be called ideas-are more alluring to more people than what Sut and I have to say. We may think our ideas are great, but the prime audience is saying no.

TWITCHELL: Is the BBC the most popular of the networks?

JHALLY: I don't have the latest figures, but I would imagine yes.

TWITCHELL: Is American dreck popular on English television?

JHALLY: Some. But if you're saying public service stuff is not popular, you're wrong.

TWITCHELL: What do you think should be on PBS?

JHALLY:There is a whole slew of independent filmmakers who don't get their work onto television or into Hollywood. The products of the Media Education Foundation, which are distributed mostly in classrooms . . . there is no shortage of stuff.

TWITCHELL: And there's an audience for this?

JHALLY: Sure. The question is whether you want to encourage diversity. Let's say it's not popular: So what! Why must popularity drive everything? Why shouldn't minority views be heard? Why is that so radical?

TWITCHELL: It's a great idea. But when I hear this argument, I always think: Why are the people saying it so powerless? Why do they always seem to be saying, "We

But do you recognize such a thing as power operating in the public sphere? Do you see that some people have more power than others and that not everyone can have their voice heard?

TWITCHELL: Here's where we differ. You see it as power coming from outside in. As if these corporate interests are over there doing things to us. I see it in a contrary way. I see a great deal of advertising and commercialism as being the articulated will of consumers rather than the air pumped out by commercial interests.

Let's take an example where you seem to hold all the cards. Take De Beers' diamonds campaign. What is more ridiculous than the browbeating of men into buying utterly worthless hunks of stone to make Harry Oppenheimer and his descendants wealthy? Here's this company saying that if you want to be successful in courting women, it requires two months of your salary. Isn't this an example, from your point of view, of power from the outside compressing human freedom and desire?

Yet as hideous as it is- and I think it the most hideous of advertising campaigns- there is something in it that speaks deeply to human beings in moments of high anxiety- namely, how to stabilize a frantic period of time. You stabilize it by buying something that all logic tells you is ridiculous and stupid, at a time in your life when you are the least able to afford it, when it is the most

powerful even if it never sells a product. The De Beers campaign means something to people who may never buy a diamond because it gives a particular vision of what love and courtship are about. I use this example in my class and people become outraged. In fact I've had students say "God, that's it, I'm never going to buy a diamond. They've tricked me into thinking that I've gotta have this." The De Beers example points to a number of things. One is how advertising works, by reaching deep-seated human needs. I don't call this manipulation. Capitalism works because in one sense it talks about real needs that drive people.

TWITCHELL: It's doing the work of religion.

JHALLY: Partly, yes. But it takes real needs and desires and says they are only possible by purchasing products. So what's real about advertising is its appeals. What's false about advertising is the answers it provides to those appeals.

TWITCHELL: But why not through objects?

JHALLY: We can argue about this in terms of moralistic standards or whatever, but I prefer an empirical question: "Do people become happier

when they have more things?" There's quite a bit of literature on this. Robert Lane and Fred Hersch have talked about it. And Tibor Scitovsky, in his wonderful book The Joyless Economy. There's a wonderful article by Richard Easterlin, who examined all the cross-cultural data on subjectivity and happiness and found that there is no correlation cross-nationally and historically between things and happiness. More things do not bring you more happiness. Although things are connected to happiness, it is always in a relative state. It is always in terms of what other people also have at that time. And so happiness in that sense is a zero-sum game.

I think you can make a fine argument for a system of production that says, "We are going to make the most number of people the most happy, and we will do this more and more over time." But capitalism is not that system. Advertising people don't want to be selling this stupid stuff, they want to be making films and writing novels. If you really wanted to make more people happy (which I think should be the goal of a political movement because that notion of subjectivity is incredibly important), then what is it that actually makes people happy? What institutions will cater to those things? Secondly, if it's having this incredible effect on the environment, then we need alternative ways of thinking about it.

TWITCHELL: I'm with you. We agree. But I'm going to be Johnny One-Note and ask, "What are those things?" I'm very suspicious of those things and how powerful they really are. The great con game when we had very few things was the promised pie in the sky. In other words, a life after death. Really, what's happened is that we've moved all those promises down here into this world. I don't know if this works or not. But who cares whether it works. We believe it works. We think things make us happy. My personal view is probably .0001 percent of that is true.

JHALLY: I want to go back to your question, "What are those things?" Those things aren't what I say they are. The social scientific literature reveals that what people talk about is social things. They want good family life. . .

TWITCHELL: Yeah, I never listen to what people say. I always listen to what people do.

JHALLY: That's a strange line for a democrat to be taking. [laughs]

TWITCHELL: No, not at all.

JHALLY: In democracies, shouldn't you pay some attention to what people say they want?

TWITCHELL: Here's my idea for an independent film. I want to set a camera on the head of my colleagues. And then I want to see what they do when they're left alone, to study the difference between saying and doing. It seems to me that reaching into the wallet is much more powerful articulation of desire and belief than delivering the lecture. In that area, I think the market essentially shows this. What is being consumed is what people really do think is entertaining them, satisfying them, making them happy. It may not be what you and I like, but it is the illusion perhaps that is so powerful. And this illusion seems to be making American culture incredibly attractive to others and making other cultures essentially mimics of American popular culture. Whatever this stuff is in advertising, it's incredibly powerful. It's pushed all these other things aside. Literature, art, religion. It's eating everybody's lunch. Maybe that's because most people most of the time want that for lunch. Maybe it really is resolving the concerns that they have, as hard as that is for us to believe.

JHALLY: Or maybe it's that the environment within which people make decisions is so dominated by one very narrow segment of the population.

TWITCHELL: Exactly.

JHALLY: That's where the issue of power comes in.

TWITCHELL: Even in countries where these commercial interests were put not just on the back burner but on no burner at all, all it took was just a momentary crack in the wall-Berlin or wherever-to come tumbling down.

JHALLY: It's the major motivating force transforming the world.

TWITCHELL: Could it also be because partly it is resolving what most people consider to be their concerns?

JHALLY: I go back to Marx on this. He starts off Capital by saying that if you can understand the world of commodities then you can understand the entire system in which we live. The other thing I always use from Marx is, "People make their own history [or meaning] . .. but not in conditions of their own choosing." If you only look at the "conditions not of their own choosing," then all you focus on is power and manipulation. If you only look at "people make their own meanings," then all you see is individual freedom and choice. If you only look at one or the other, you get a distorted view.

Advertising is the conditions not of your own choosing because it has dominated everything. If you give me a monopoly I can sell you anything. That's what De Beers did.

TWITCHELL: And, of course, communist countries essentially had a monopoly on media and on the production of objects and what happened to them? Why weren't they strong enough, powerful enough to make the dream of Marx come to reality?

JHALLY: Well, they weren't Marxist countries. The Soviet Union never dealt with people's individual needs. The Soviet Union fell apart because no one believed it. It fell apart partly because they could see these images coming out of the West, the most glamorous images of an alternative. When your reality is hunger and despair, no wonder this advertising model should be so powerful.

TWITCHELL: You seem to see advertising as a trick. I see the trickery not as them pulling a trick on us, but us actively collaborating in this process. Like the audience observing the magician, we know the lady is not being sawed in half. We can't quite understand how it works, but we suspend disbelief and give ourselves over to it. Even though we know that the claims of Alka-Seltzer are not true, we give ourselves over to it.

JHALLY: I agree. Advertising is an active process of creating meaning in which people and advertisers interact. But that is not devoid of power. Again, people make their own messages and meanings, but not in conditions of their own choosing. Jim always wants to stress the first part.

TWITCHELL: Yes I do.

JHALLY: I stress both. I don't stress the second part, but I don't forget the second part. If you don't have the second part, then you don't have the context within which things are taking place. You have abstract analysis, literary analysis. That's why I asked you if you view your work as literary analysis, because that would explain our different takes.

TWITCHELL: Yes, and I think the context that Sut refers to is so close to the water in which all us fish are swimming that we're begging the question if we think we can ever come to any understanding of it.

JHALLY: Oh, but we have to try, otherwise what are we here for? One more thing. It's a little bit annoying to me because you used your colleagues as evidence, but I agree, I think most academics don't think about knowledge the way that you and I do, actually. I think most people view this as a relatively simple, easy job that allows you to teach six hours a week and once you've got tenure you don't have to do very much.

★: Jim, where does morality figure into advertising?

TWITCHELL: It doesn't. Advertising has one moral: buy stuff. Not very sophisticated. There are certain areas where I think we should pull the cord and say, "No advertising." I'm vehemently against Channel One. I despise billboards. They are, in my opinion, immoral. I am distraught that the State not only has gone into the lottery business but advertising. Other than that, I think that the application of moral concerns to advertising is feckless.

JHALLY: I think there is a morality in advertising. It may not be totally systematic, everyone may not adhere to the same thing, but there is a sort of story about what is good and bad, and what values should be stressed. That is a moral system. And I think you can evaluate that as you can evaluate any moral system. I think whether advertising tells the truth or not is actually the last thing you should evaluate it for.

TWITCHELL: It does not tell the truth.

"Like the audience observing the magician, we know the lady is not being sawed in half. We can't quite understand how it works, but we suspend disbelief and give ourselves over to it. Even though we know that the claims of Alka-Seltzer are not true, we give ourselves over to it."

JHALLY: Advertising doesn't even make any claims. That's one of the great tricks of the ad industry in terms of how it's regulated. You can only take legislative action against an ad if you can prove it is deceptive. But you can't evaluate most ads on that basis because there is nothing to evaluate.

TWITCHELL: I think when most people consume advertising, they know that they have to filter it because it's not going to be telling them the truth. But it's not the truth that they're after. They're after these patterns that have to do with belonging, with ordering, with making sense. So put the Truth Meter on Nike and you'll say "My God, who would pay an extra 50 percent for something that is fungible with another product?" Put the Truth Meter on De Beers and you'd see that, "My God, what are we doing?" It's not put on these things because clearly they're addressing concerns that are not susceptible to normal reasoning. Ask somebody who has just bought a Lexus SUV, "Was that a sensible purchase?" And they'll almost always tell you it was a ridiculous purchase. Ask them why they bought it and they'll say, "I dunno. . . I just like the idea that I have this." Why would somebody have a Polo pony on their shirt when they know that they're just paying an exorbitant amount for the pony? Why would they do that unless somehow the pony was a badge or some kind of a token through which they magically thought they could understand and fit into the world?

I am as susceptible as anyone. Sut teaches at the University of Massachusetts. Down the road is Amherst College, which charges triple what U. Mass charges. I, and my colleagues, go into voluntary indenture sending our kids to schools like Amherst rather than the University of Massachusetts. Why do I, who is inside this system and I know that U. Mass is not four times worse than Amherst, why do I go and borrow money to send my kids to this school? I do it because in the system that I move, that is one of the Polo ponies. It doesn't go on my shirt, actually, it's a decal that goes on the back of my Volvo. It violates every sensible bit of behavior. But in so doing it gives me what I want, which is this other sense of, "I'm doing well, I'm raising my child properly, I'm with the community that I feel values what I do." We are willing and conscious participants in a process that is hyper-irrational.

★: Is advertising art?

TWITCHELL: Art is whatever I say it is, and I mean that quite literally. There is a group of people whose job is to make claims about certain things and in making those claims essentially apply the label "art." We are to high culture what advertisers, in some ways, are to mass-produced objects. Art really is what the people who teach literature, teach art, who run galleries, who edit magazines, say it is. It is not immutable, it is not timeless, it is not free of space. It's a community of critics who, in order to trade, teach, and communicate, say certain works need special treatment and that they're art.

Is advertising art? No. Could it become art? Absolutely. The next generation may very well look at Bimbauch's Volkswagon ads and say, "Oh, that's art!" But right now, advertising is in the position of photography back in the 1930s where it was treated as a kind of whimsical, not very serious study. You can see it happening in movies. Movies which were thought to be entertainment, now thanks to the Academy, are considered works of enduring art.

JHALLY: There is a famous article by Theodore Levitt that essentially equates advertising with art. It's a defense of advertising that says, "People have always interpreted the world. What's the problem?" It suggests that as long as advertising doesn't lie, it should be evaluated by the same criteria that we've always evaluated art. I think that's a sort of self-serving argument.

TWITCHELL: But you wouldn't think that advertising currently is thought of that way, would you?

JHALLY: It depends what you mean by "art." Art in elite standards, no. But advertising has always been popular art. Even early on, people stuck ads on their walls. And in one sense that's a good indication of what people regard as art.

TWITCHELL: Except it's the wrong people. If you were to take your camera around to your colleagues' cubicles, what you'd see there would be more intriguing. I think if you were to take a camera around to my colleagues' offices you would find a lot of advertising.

[**At this point, I asked them to comment on a fan letter to Nike, which was printed in Stay Freel #14; the letter writer, like many Nike devotees, has a Nike tattoo; she thanks Nike for helping turn her life around and offers an idea for a commercial.**]

TWITCHELL: "Listen, Carrie, I've been terribly depressed in my life, I've been an alcoholic, free-based cocaine for most of my childhood, and then I found Jesus . . . and, look, I have a cross tattooed on my forearm.

Of course, I'm distressed over someone who attributes redemption to a sneaker company. I've been conditioned not to be distressed at a born-again Christian.

JHALLY: I'm more distressed by the born-again Christian (laughs). . . Your analogy is right on. I'd like to ask her exactly what about Nike made a great difference in her life. Part of it I can understand because the culture tells us that redemption comes through objects and she just happened to choose the one that, for the moment, is everywhere. Her reaction is not totally off the wall, although it is extreme.

TWITCHELL: What separates her and the Yuppie with his Polo pony?

JHALLY: Not much. There's a wonderful new book out called *The Overspent American,* by Juliet Schor.

TWITCHELL: [laughing] Don't tell me you liked that!

JHALLY: I thought is was great. It talked about how people go into debt for these things without the satisfaction that is supposed to go along with it. Goods have always been used to demarcate groups. A lot of defenses of advertising come from that notion, "Oh, people have always used products in this way, products have always had symbolic dimensions, what's wrong with advertising as long as we don't lie," etc.

Part of being human is connecting through objects. That in itself is not what's interesting. What's interesting is the context within which these things appear. That's what analysis is for . . . Advertising says you are what you buy. Religions offer other conceptions of identity .

TWITCHELL: Where do you see power existing in a religious world? If power in the consumer world is with the producer or corporation.

JHALLY: In the religious world, power comes from the church.

TWITCHELL: I see the power more from the congregation than behind the pulpit. And the analogy with advertising is a valid one: Consumers travel through ads looking for meaning and purpose; so, too, the congregation forces the pastor to behave in certain ways. You say the power is with the Vatican or Madison Avenue, whereas the power really is in the supermarket aisle or church pew.

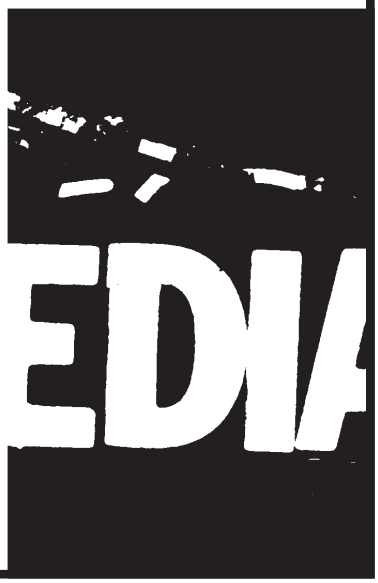
JHALLY:I think power is in both places. You can't look at one or the other.

[I asked Sut to state briefly, in closing, what he thinks can and should be done about advertising's monopoly of the culture.]

JHALLY: Cultural change takes time. The Left needs to see culture as a place where we have to battle. And we have to build new institutions that will be able to battle in that field. I'm trying to do it through Media Education Foundation as one start.

Of course, there's a risk in engaging in advertising because the language may take you over. But there's no other choice right now, that's the language of the modern world and we've got to use it. ■

"is advertising art? Absolutely. The next generation may very well look at Bimbauch's Volkswagon ads and say, 'Oh, that's art!' But right now, advertising is in the position of photography back in the 1930s where it was treated as a kind of whimsical, not very serious study."



Through the Smoke Screen

Another Philip Morris Front Exposed

An election year approaches, and with it another round in the corporate PR campaign to keep democracy in check. Nobody blows smoke into the American political system better than the tobacco industry, as evidenced by the case of Contributions Watch (CW), a Philip Morris front group that serves as a powerful illustration of how cigarette companies can corrupt the debate over smoking and public policy.

The CW operation, one of the most sophisticated corporate scams ever conducted, was exposed four years ago. Memos and reports prepared at CW and displayed here show how the group's staff of public relations pros and political consultants masqueraded as a "public interest" group while advancing the big tobacco agenda.

by Jon Elliston

One aspect of the industry's political power is well understood, that of campaign donations. During the 1996 presidential campaign, the media gave ample attention to Bob Dole's long-standing ties to big tobacco, focusing on the huge financial gifts cigarette makers lavished on the former senator and the Republican party. The Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington, DC research group, reported that Philip Morris was the top overall contributor for the 1996 campaign season, giving $2,741,659 — 78 percent of which was donated to Republicans.

With publicly reported donations like these, the industry was openly, unabashedly purchasing political influence. But big tobacco's generous lobbying activities haven't shielded the industry from criticism and regulation. The cigarette business is still facing attacks from government agencies, doctors, anti-smoking activists and regular citizens. Lawsuits threaten to tap into the industry's profits. In response, the major tobacco companies have launched a desperate, no-holds-barred effort to shore up public opinion in their favor and to manipulate votes.

It's not an easy job. Due to years of dishonest advertising about smoking and health, the industry's statements are received by a highly suspicious public. With their credibility in tatters, tobacco companies now speak through a growing number of deceptive front groups. Though less discussed than traditional lobbying efforts, these surreptitious campaigns have influenced voters in many key political contests.

Many of these efforts go forward under the "smokers' rights" banner, in reference to the purportedly popular movement concocted by big tobacco. In recent years, the major companies have founded and backed "grass-roots" organizations to agitate against greater government regulations on smoking and higher taxes on cigarettes. The largest of these so-called "astro-turf" groups, the National Smokers Alliance (NSA), works for Philip Morris, which created the group in 1993.

The NSA says it now has over 3 million members, and documents leaked to the media indicate that Philip Morris provides about $7 million of the group's $11 million annual budget. John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, authors of *Toxic Sludge is Good for You!: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, describe the NSA as "a sophisticated, camouflaged campaign that organizes tobacco's victims to protect tobacco's profits."

The links between Philip Morris and the NSA have been extensively reported. Contributions Watch was run in a similar fashion, but managed to hide its tobacco ties with complete success for several months.

The organization was created in early 1996 by the State Affairs Company (SAC), a Reston, Virginia public relations firm under the employ of Philip Morris. CW's director, Warren Miller, once worked for SAC, and in fact the entire operation was effectively run out of SAC's office. CW employees were urged to keep quiet about the connection to Philip Morris. Billing itself as an "independent" research group, CW began preparing and issuing studies on the tobacco industry's number one enemy: trial lawyers. By documenting the political activities of the lawyer lobby, Philip Morris evidently hoped to stem the flow of anti-tobacco lawsuits.

The smoke screen lobby had added a new weapon to its arsenal: the "cut-out." In the jargon of international espionage, "cut-outs" are organizations that serve as a conduit for funds but protect the source of the funds from exposure. With a protective bureaucratic layer standing between Philip Morris and CW, the trail of cigarette money was indeed hard to follow.

At least for a little while, that is. For much of 1996, CW was a hit. The group's studies found their way into major media reports, with no mention of the Philip Morris agenda behind the work.

Like any good public relations firm, SAC emphasized contacts with news organizations. SAC activities reports obtained by *MediaReader* show how the firm massaged the media. Pushing the CW data with political reporters, during the summer of 1996 SAC billed Philip Morris (at rates as high as $200 per hour) for "meetings with journalists in Washington to discuss story concepts"; "day to day coordination with journalists preparing stories"; "meeting with editor at The Wall Street Journal"; "extensive preparation and 2 meetings with reporter on Weekly Standard [magazine] project"; and "coordination with Wall Street Journal re: two editorial projects."

The high-price media outreach came to a halt in late September 1996, however, when CW employee Tom Wheeler blew the whistle on the tobacco dollars that footed the bill. Exposés in *PR Watch*, *CounterPunch*, and the *Washington Post* probed the cigarette connection, and in short order CW's reputation as an "independent" source of information disappeared like smoke in the wind.

SAC officials tried in vain to keep the focus on CW's reports on lawyers' political donations. Charles Francis, a partner at the firm, pleaded sarcastically to one reporter: "The fact that the demon tobacco industry has dared count this money does not dispute or undermine the results."

Once the truth about CW went public, Philip Morris was hit with what the company strives to avoid: another damaging round of critical media commentary. The *Washington Post* editorialized: "It's best in this new era of advocacy to be extremely wary about the reports, studies and 10-point plans put forth by organizations whose identities are hidden behind titles like 'Americans for Justice,' 'Taxpayers for True Reform' and 'Mothers for Peace and Virtue'. . . . The Philip Morris case brings us to a new level. . . . Philip Morris in particular should avoid smoke screens, stop filtering its data through righteously titled fronts and cough up any interesting information on its own letterhead." Liberal populist Jim Hightower urged listeners of his radio show to "beware of this fraud called Contributions Watch — it's no watch-dog, it's a lap dog." Even PR Central, an online publication covering the promotions industry, rebuked Philip Morris for the CW scheme, calling it "a moronic attempt to hide a perfectly legitimate exercise."

Moronic, maybe. But even when the method fails, Philip Morris has a legitimate reason to hide its agenda behind phony fronts, and there's no reason to think the company won't give it another try during Campaign 2000. ■

Internal documents for the Philip Morris front are available on-line in *Dossier*, an archive of materials on covert operations, political scandals and propaganda campaigns:

www.parascope.com/dossier.htm

Activities Report

To: Philip Morris

RE: June 1, 1996 - June 30, 1996 Activities

- Meeting in New York to discuss themes, specific objectives and coordination, McCloud and Francis - 6/19/96
- Meetings with journalists in Washington to discuss story concepts
- Day to day coordination with journalists preparing stories
- Media relations and coordination with research activites
- Development of Texas alliances / stories in other States

Activities Report

To: Philip Morris

RE: July Activites

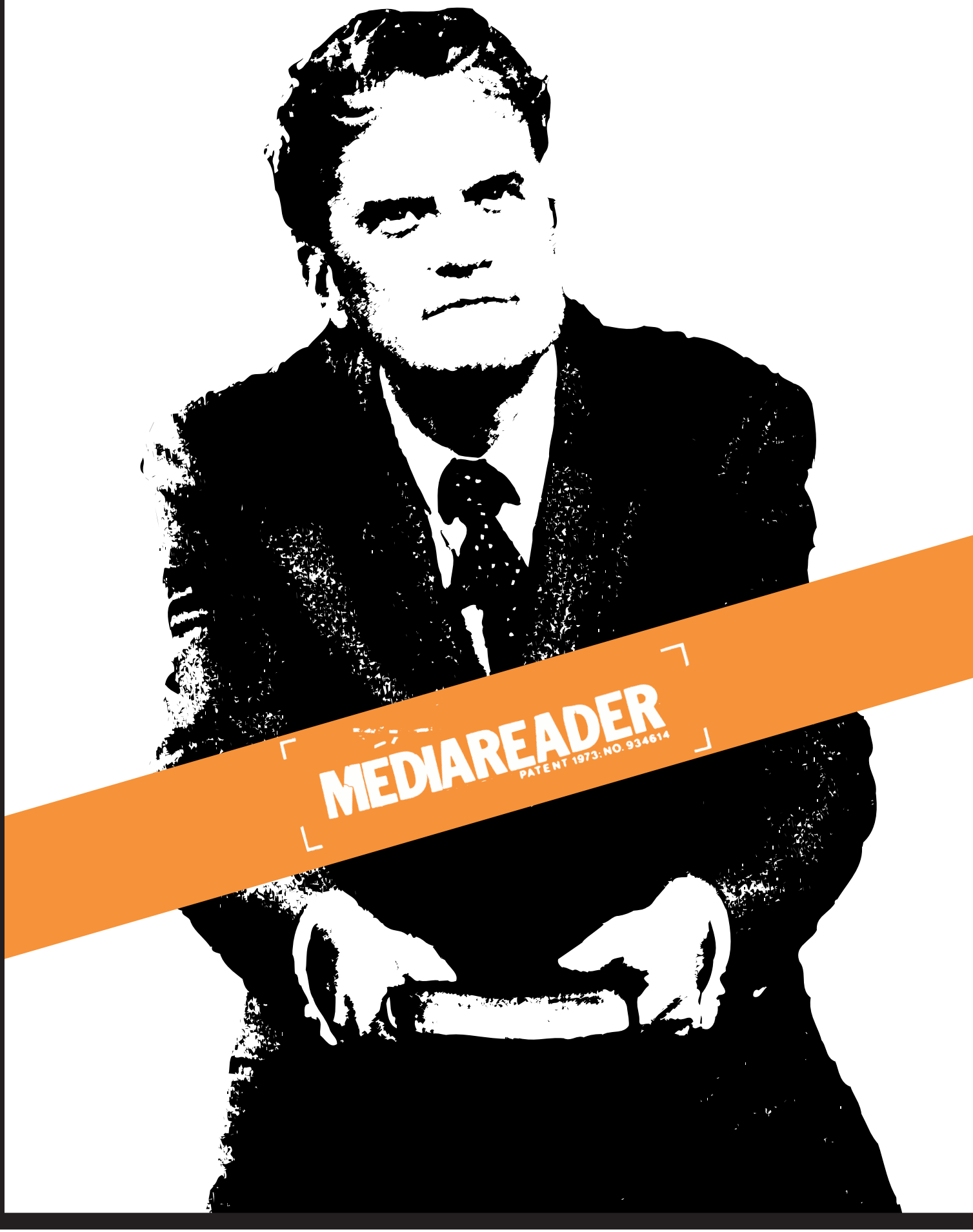
- Preparation and meeting with editor at The Wall Street Journal
- Follow-up work with The Wall Street Journal
- Extensive preparation and 2 meetings with reporter on Weekly Standard project
- Follow-up to those meetings
- Meeting with David Laufer in New York (Davis and Francis)
- Developed new story re: Consultant
- Coordination with APCO

August Activities Report

To: Philip Morris

- Worked with reporter on comprehensive campaign finance story, initial three hour meeting (including preparation for that meeting); day to day answering questions, meetings, developing new materials and documentation
- Ongoing coordination with APCO's Cohen and Cooper re: abstract information
- Ongoing coordination with APCO re: release of other numbers
- Conference calls, 8/13; 8/20; 8/29
- New York meetings 8/14; 8/26; 8/29 -- with team and journalists
- Coordination with Wall Street Journal re: two editorial projects

Transcripts of activities reports prepared for Philips Morris in the last three last months before Contributions Watch was exposed by a whistleblower. The documents note extensive media work.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